Oray's Publications
Impact Factor: 6.449(SJIF) **Research Journal Of English (RJOE)** Vol-6, Issue-4, 2021
www.rjoe.org.in An International Peer-Reviewed English Journal ISSN: 2456-2696
Indexed in: International Citation Indexing (ICI), International Scientific Indexing (ISI), Directory of Research Journal Indexing (DRJI) Google Scholar &Cosmos.

The Malicious Duke: A Tragic Reading of Robert Browning's poem "*My Last Dutchess*"

Harry C Joseph
Online English Tutor for International Students

Abstract
The main objective of the present study is to examine with particular reference to Robert Browning's Poem "My Last Duchess," the presence of a tragic villain who at times disguises as a tragic hero. Browning possibly with his fascination for tragedy has included many tragic elements in his dramatic monologue. This ensuing sense of an impending horror, a damp air of crime and the play of fate, though mostly in the form of the malicious intentions of the Duke, has left the possibility for a tragic reading of the poem which is what this paper attempts at.

Keywords: Tragedy, Hamartia, False Hero

Introduction

Man has always been aware of the tragic nature of his life and of the fact that "it flowers and fructifies . . . (only) out of the profoundest tragic depths."(Dupee 13)A mythological crystallization of this idea can be found in the story of Adam and Eve. Tragedy as a form of art witnessed its bloom in Greece through the creative spurt of Sophocles and in England through that of Shakespeare. Traditionally, tragedy has been considered the noblest of the arts and its fascinated the human spirit in all ages and at all times. It is true that in our own age there has been a tendency, under the influence of the study of astrophysics, genetics, anthropology, psychology and sociology, to divest man of his tragic status and to deemphazize the human factor in social effort. The age of computer and cybernetics may not accord to man the tragic dignity that Sophocles and Shakespeare gave to their heroes but that does not mean that the age of tragedy is over. In the cyber age, high tragedies like Oedipus Rex and King Lear may be beyond a man's reach; he may not be able to conceive of a hero waging wars with the gods or fighting with the elemental forces. The heroes of modern men are little people and their tragedies are little tragedies. All the same, they are tragedies as they contain almost all the elements of the high tragedies. Their exploration is more spiritual than physical, more intangible than tangible, and more silent than vociferous. So, modem tragedies can appropriately be called "the voiceless little tragedies of the soul."(Bragdon 16)

"The search for a definition of tragedy," as the Shakespearean critic Stephen Booth astutely observes, "has been the most persistent and widespread of all non-religious quests for

definition."(Drakakis 16) The first attempt to define tragedy was made by Aristotle. Renaissance made a gospel of his Poetics. It was considered in the 18th century as infallible as the Elements of Euclid. But, the authority of Aristotle was challenged and new ideas were incorporated into tragedy by 19th and 20th century writers like Marx, Nietzsche, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, George Steiner and Arthur Miller. Now it has come to be accepted that there is no eternal idea of tragedy. Herbert J. Muller observes:

> Aristotle was only an ancient Greek addressing fellow Greeks, not mankind . . . . Shakespeare, Racine, and Ibsen differ as widely from one another as from Sophocles. As for modem literature, it is a jungle growth of ISMS that cut across all the traditional genres. The tragic spirit now finds expression in the novel as well as in the drama. (Muller 9-10)

Morris Writz supports the opinion of Muller when he writes, "No true real definition of tragedy is possible, since the form is ever open to new historical possibilities. It is simply a historical fact that the concept as we know and use it, has continuously accommodated new cases of tragedy, and more important, the new properties of these new cases".(Writz 160)

Every tragedy involves I serious preoccupation with the timeless realities of life and that is in fact, the reason for its universal appeal. A romanticist creates a world of illusory happiness and a naturalist paints a dreary picture of life whereas a tragedian portrays the reality of life with man at the centre of his frame confronting the mysterious universe, often defeated but always triumphant spiritually over his defeat. The tragic writer in the words of Herbert J. Muller:

> speaks to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives; to our sense of pity, and beauty and pain; to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation and to the subtle but invincible connection of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts, to the solidarity in dreams, in joy, in sorrow, in aspirations, in illusions, in hope, in fear, which binds man to each other, which binds together all humanity-the dead to the living and the living to the unborn.(Muller 33)

A.C. Bradley remarks that the ultimate power in the tragic world is moral order, which is concerned with good and evil. By good and evil is meant moral good and evil and also everything we take to be excellent or ugly. The tragic hero, who is a true and faithful representative of man, finds within himself the seeds of good and evil. He also confronts the good and evil in the world outside himself. The dramatis' personae of Sophocles and Shakespeare are men and women with human dignity and grandeur. But they all fall as a result of an inherent defect in their character, which Aristotle calls in his Poetics, *Hamartia*. *Hamartia* is nothing but a kind of evil that prompts the tragic hero to act in ignorance leading to a great personal catastrophe. Usually it is his *hamartia* and the resultant ignorance, illusion, pride and a league of such defects that make him fall a victim to the evil outside himself.

The main objective of the present study is to examine with particular reference to Robert Browning's Poem "My Last Duchess," the presence of a tragic villain who at times disguises as a tragic hero. Browning possibly with his fascination for tragedy has included many tragic elements in his dramatic monologue. This ensuing sense of an impending horror, a damp air of crime and the play of fate, though mostly in the form of the malicious intentions of the Duke, has left the possibility for a tragic reading of the poem which is what this paper attempts at.

Vaulting Ambition- Cold Blooded Loving Husband

The hero of a tragedy goes through a rhythm or pattern of experience. In the terms suggested by Kenneth Burke, "the basic rhythm of the tragic action is purpose, passion and perception. The hero's purpose is defeated, his passion is harrowing, but through his final perception he comes to terms with his fate or if he doesn't the spectator does."(Muller 19) The tragic rhythm the hero undergoes may also be envisioned as a kind of journey through various phases like innocence, evil, passion and perception.

A whole lot of Shakespearean characters come to our mind when we think of a tragic hero. Some of them include Macbeth, Hamlet, Othello and King Lear to name a few from the four great tragedies. It is only with a sense of nobility and respect that we can describe these characters. The same is the reason for loud mourning at their downfalls.

In the poem "My Last Dutchess," we encounter a Duke, presumably the Duke of Ferrara, who presents himself with an exasperating sense of nobility to an envoy of a Count whose daughter he is about to marry. The opening lines go thus: That's my last Duchess painted on the wall / Looking as if she were alive. I call / That piece a wonder (Browning, lines 1 -3). It is the detachment and the lack of feeling with which the Duke speaks of his dead wife that astonishes the listeners. This gives the impression of a soliloquy we see in a Shakespearean tragedy which the tragic heroes delivers expressing his thoughts. One could compare it to Macbeth's Soliloquy in Act 1 Scene 7:

> If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twer well, It were done quickly: If th' Assassination Could trammel vp the Consequence, and catch With his surcease, Successes: that but this blow Might be the be all, and the end all. Heere,But heere, vpon this Banke and Schoole of time, Wee'ld iumpe the life to come. But in these Cases,
> We still haue iudgement heere, that we but teachBloody Instructions, which being taught, returneTo plague th'Inuenter, this euen-handed Iustice Commends th 'Ingredience of our poyson'd Challice To our owne lips. Hee's heere in double trust;First, as I am his Kinsman, and his Subiect, Strong both against the Deed: Then, as his Host,Who should against his Murtherer shut the doore,Not beare the knife my selfe. Besides, this DuncaneHath borne his Faculties so meeke; hath bin

> So cleere in his great Office, that his Vertues Will pleade like Angels, Trumpet-tongu'd against The deepe damnation of his taking off: And Pitty, like a naked New-borne-Babe,Striding the blast, or Heauens Cherubin, hors'd the sightlesse Curriors of the Ayre,Shall blow the horrid deed in euery eye,That teares shall drowne the winde. I haue no SpurreTo pricke the sides of my intent, but onelyVaulting Ambition, which ore-leapes it selfe,
> And falles on th'other. (Macbeth 1.7. 448-475)

One could discern the same thirst for blood when he says "looking as if she were alive." He had doubly assured himself that she is dead and then even the sight of her portrait wherein she appears to be alive annoys him.

Furthermore, his psychic zeal to talk more of the living portrait than his dead wife exposes the murderous and evil designs of his heart. In a way, the mystery and reason for his wife's death is encapsulated in the portrait. He reveals it thus:

> For never read
> Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
> The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
> But to me they turned (since none puts by
> The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
> Ans semmed as they would ask me, if they durst,
> How such a glance came there;so,not the first
> Are you to turn and ask thus. (Browning, lines 6-13)

The very smile whose meaning is beyond the scope of understanding is the cause of her death. The Duke could not resist himself from confessing it as he owes the mindscape of a culprit who has safely committed a crime without leaving any piece of material evidence. He frantically enjoys and shares the joy of his heinous crime. The Duke with a sense of rage decribes that smile as something "paint must never hope to reproduce the faint / Half- flush that dies along her throat"(lines 17-19).

The extent of his cruelty is better conveyed through his own description of his earlier wife. Even though his intention is to put her in bad light and establish that she is not someone worth for his family, as a blessing in disguise it reveals the innocence and virtue of her character. The Duke describes her thus:

> She had
> A heart –how shall I say?-too soon made glad
> Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
> She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
> Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,

The dropping of the daylight in the West,
The bough of Cherries some officious fool
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
She rode with round the terrace-all and each
Would draw from her alike the approving speech
Or blush (Browning, lines 21-31).

This best exemplify the noble character of the Duchess. It is true in all respect that the Duke does not deserve her. What further annoys him was that she destroys the reputation of his family with her generous and easy going attitude. He says, "as if she ranked / My gift of a nine- hundred year old name / With anybody's gift." (lines 32-34) A reader could come to the realization that he is man who never loved anyone. Everything and anything is just a matter of his personal pride. Hence in a half uttered sentence he simply removed his wife from his life as said in his own words, "I gave commands / then all smiles stopped together." (lines 45-46)

It is inevitable for a tragic hero to go through the phase of evil. It tests his character and adds luster to his person just as gold is purified by fire. His confrontation with evil may shatter his illusion, but such a harrowing experience is necessary for his growth. A tragic hero cannot remain innocent or ignorant for long. His aim is to unravel the mystery of life at least to some extent and shed light upon the dark comers of life. It is his duty to penetrate into the heart of things shoving aside all appearances and mundane considerations. The soul of man is the focus of tragedy and his soul grows and matures only with an initiation into a world of evil.

Unfortunately for the Duke, there is no pint of *catharsis.* He is least affected by his evils. Rather he grows more greedy and goes in search of new prospects. His intention of a second marriage is very well revealed by the evil forebodings of his own thoughts. He says:

I repeat
The Count your Master's known munificence
Is ample warrant that no just pretence
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed. (Browning, lines 48-51)

These rules out the possibility of any sort of nobility left with him. He has completely transformed into a wicked villain beyond any possibility of coming back. His destiny is in the hands of Fate and no one but his actions are to be blamed.

Conclusion

The word "tragedy" is being misused simply and perhaps viciously. In daily parlance we use it to refer to any sordid or depressing event such as a mining disaster or a smash on the road. Nathan A. Scott means the same when he says, "We are all incorrigibly habituated in designating as tragic those elements and experiences that put us in mind of what Vergil called "the tears in things."(Scott 122) But, the word tragedy has a much deeper and different

meaning. "Tragedy" comes to us as a word from a long tradition of European civilization, a common Greeco-Christian tradition which has shaped Western civilization. To the Greeks and the Elizabethans tragedy was not a sordid or a pessimistic affair. It was something which brought them exaltation and roused them to deeper spiritual levels of understanding liberating them from the petty greeds of every day existence. When they saw a tragedy on the stage, they felt their own hopes ennobled in art. According to Adrian Poole, for them tragedy was a unique kind of *pharamkon* or medicine embodying the most paradoxical feelings and thoughts and believes.(Poole 239) Through tragedy they recognized and refelt a sense of the value and the fatality of human life, of both its purpose and its emptiness.

The present study was an attempt to read the poem "My Last Dutchess" by Robert Browning in the light of the ideals of tragedy which we have accumulated all through these ages right from the days of Greek tragedies. Here the Duke of Ferrara attains may of the qualities of a tragic villain even though he tries to carve out a niche of tragic hero for himself. Also, the use of dramatic monologue and the unique setting of the poem along with its strange artifacts add to this element of tragic sense.

References

Bragdon, Claude. *Old Lamps for New*. Bristol: Macmillan, 1968.

Browning, Robert. "My Last Duchess." *Whispers of Immortality*. Ed. Anil Wilson. Delhi: IUP, 2008.

Drakakis, John and Naomi Conn Leibler. *Tragedy*. Newyork: Longman, 1998.

Dupee, F.W. *Henry James*. Newyork: Longman, 1998.

Muller, Herbert J. *The Spirit of Tragedy*. Newyork: Alfred A Knop, 1956.

Poole, Adrian. *Shakespeare and the Greek Example*. Oxford: Basil Backwell, 1987.

Scott, Nathan A. *The Tragic Vision and the Christian Faith*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1966.

Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*. Edited by Rex Gibson. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005. Print.

Writz, Morris. "Tragedy." *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Ed. Paul Edwards. 1972, Vol 8. p 160.